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How U.S. Decided To Pressure Gadhafi

Renewal Surprised Public, Some Top Aides

By Don Oberdorfer and Lou Cannon
Washington Post Staff Writers

The resurgence of tension this week between the United States and Libya was rooted in a Reagan administration plan to pressure Col. Moammar Gadhafi, which was first formulated in January and updated in mid-August by President Reagan and his top foreign policy advisers, administration officials said yesterday.

The sudden return of the U.S.-Libya conflict to front pages and television evening news shows was a surprise to the U.S. public—and also to the top ranks of the executive branch, which reacted to the unexpected publicity with disarray and confusion.

One decision made in mid-August, according to a participant, was to withhold any information about the newly revamped U.S. campaign against the Libyan leader. Thus many officials were taken aback on Monday by an unusually lengthy and detailed Wall Street Journal account of the plan, which stirred a week of comment and speculation.

The U.S. plan, according to knowledgeable officials, includes economic, political and military pressures, from economic sanctions to covert action to U.S. military exercises in the Mediterranean intended to impress Libya with American might. Another element, an official said, is "keeping psychological pressure on Gadhafi" in an effort to add to his many problems.

An official who participated in several U.S. planning meetings said he had never heard anyone say during the discussions that an aim was to "scare Gadhafi" into taking irrational actions. However, another participant said the "hidden agenda" of some officials seems to be to provoke Gadhafi into dangerous and erratic action, but that such a goal does not appear in any policy paper.

Since coming to power, the Reagan administration has been gripped, some say obsessed, by the

mercurial Libyan leader. Libya was a major item on the agenda of the first Reagan-era National Security Council meeting on Jan. 21, 1981, and the topic has often recurred. A U.S. plan to combat Gadhafi—and especially his support for international terrorism—was drawn up by mid-1981, before U.S. and Libyan warplanes clashed in the Gulf of Sidra that August.

A more detailed anti-Gadhafi program was drafted last January under the council's deputy director, Donald R. Fortier, who died recently. This plan led to Reagan's Jan. 7 announcement of new U.S. economic sanctions and unannounced decisions to renew U.S. air and naval operations near Libya as part of a long-term war of nerves.

In March, Reagan ordered U.S. naval vessels to cross Gadhafi's "line of death" in the Gulf of Sidra, which Libya claims as its own, knowing that Gadhafi likely would react militarily. When Libya launched antiaircraft missiles and deployed patrol boats, U.S. forces attacked a missile site on Libyan territory and sank two patrol boats.

The following day, Gadhafi announced in Tripoli that "it is a time for confrontation—for war," and privately sent coded messages—which were intercepted by U.S. intelligence—to Libyan diplomatic missions around the world ordering attacks on Americans. When such an attack took place, on April 5 in a West Berlin discotheque, Reagan retaliated 10 days later with bombing raids on Tripoli and Benghazi.

Since the immediate fallout of the April bombing raid—including efforts to enlist European support for anti-Libyan sanctions—the subject of Libya had faded from public attention and from attention of top U.S. policymakers.

That began to change, so far as administration insiders were concerned, by late July when Reagan approved a new Libya policy review within the National Security Council. This led to two meetings of the highly secret Crisis Pre-Planning Group on the subject of Libya, and, in the week of Aug. 11, a meeting

of Reagan and his top advisers in a National Security Planning Group that formulated the revised U.S. plan.

Several reasons have been cited by officials for the renewal of U.S. planning. Secretary of State George P. Shultz and national security affairs adviser John M. Poindexter thought "it was time to take another look," said a policymaker. He and others said there was also the renewal of intelligence reports of Libyan efforts to arrange terrorist actions, after a period when few such efforts were reported.

Senior White House officials say they have "hard evidence" that Gadhafi has been planning new terrorism against Americans and "other targets" in Europe. Another official familiar with the intelligence said "the stuff wasn't real hard" but that U.S. agencies in cooperation with other governments are attempting to pin it down.

Whatever the quality of the intelligence, nobody has claimed it is the sort of "direct . . . precise . . . irrefutable" evidence that Reagan cited in announcing the April 15 air strikes against Libya. That Oval Office address included specific details of the intercepted messages to and from the Libyan People's Bureau, or embassy, in East Berlin at the time of the disco bombing. This information, which was made public by Reagan in justification of the air strikes against the advice of NSC staff members, is said to have dried up Libyan use of electronic means for passing confidential instructions, making U.S. knowledge of them much more difficult to obtain.

It was not secret Libyan communication but open communication within the United States, namely The Wall Street Journal article and its aftermath, that held the attention of policymakers since Monday of this week. With Reagan, Shultz and others on vacation and officials split between Washington and California, policymakers were alternatively pleased, nonplussed or dismayed by the report, which was at various times embraced or discounted.

As of yesterday, several important officials continued to say that an NSC staff member acting on his own volition had "leaked" the latest U.S. plans to the Journal. The newspaper's managing editor, Norman Pearlstine, said the story was the product of "some old-fashioned reporting" from a variety of good sources, "not at all a planted story by the administration."

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